30 Years of Cost Share and Iowa's Water Quality

There has been a lot of attention leveled at water quality in recent years. A lot can be learned by studying our lakes, rivers and streams; but in order to truly understand what is happening with water quality in a state like Iowa, it is necessary to turn around and look upstream. What happens on the landscape has a huge impact on the water downhill from that landscape.

Of the 157 impaired waters in Iowa on the 1998 list, well over half were included because of sedimentation problems. Keeping the soil where it belongs is not new to Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCDs). In fact, it has been the focus of Districts for well over 60 years.

This year during Soil and Water Conservation Week, November 16-22, we are celebrating 30 years of the "first in the nation" soil conservation Financial Incentives Program. Over its lifetime, the State of Iowa has invested over $150 million in financial incentives to assist landowners to protect their farms from the damaging effects of soil erosion. Those same landowners have invested an equal amount from their own pocketbooks, stimulating tremendous economic activity in local communities throughout Iowa.

The Division of Soil Conservation estimates that we have stopped over 18 million tons of fertile topsoil from escaping our fields in that 30 year timeframe. That is enough precious black soil to provide a six-inch layer for over 20,000 football fields. Put another way, the soil saved in the lifetime of the Financial Incentives Program would cover all four lanes of an interstate highway stretching from California to New York. Of course a good share of the lost soil may have found its way to our state's waterways, so in effect, SWCDs have been a partner in improving water quality for years.

Improving water quality isn't difficult to understand. Placing waterways, terraces, grade stabilization structures, and diversions in the right locations, save soil and preserve water quality. Reducing tillage and leaving crop residue on the soil surface improve soil quality and reduce the movement of soil as well. In the end, soil conservation work means that less sediment makes its way to the water.

We can't go wrong. By investing in soil conservation, we get the best of both worlds: we improve the productivity of our farms and keep sediment out of our water. That's a win-win scenario where everyone benefits.

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Bill Ehm